
U.S. Representative

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South Carolina ■ 5th District

5th District Report

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Democratic Budget Helps Military Retirees

by Congressman John Spratt

On March 23 we brought the budget before the House, and as ranking member on the Budget Committee, I prepared and managed the Democratic budget resolution on the House floor. We provided for tax cuts, but still funded a new prescription drug benefit under Medicare and committed \$20 billion more to education than the Republican budget.

In addition, we put more into veterans' health care, and included a big plus I am particularly proud of — \$16.3 billion over ten years for health care for military retirees. My budget was not the version of the budget that passed, but we garnered 184 votes, and that's a strong show of support as Congress takes up 13 individual spending bills that make up the budget.

The Democratic budget funded major provisions of H.R. 3655, the "Improved Medical Care for Troops and Retirees Act." I am a cosponsor of H.R. 3655, and my budget resolution would move this bill a step closer to becoming law.

At age 65, military retirees eligible for Medicare lose guaranteed access to the military health care system, and are left to rely on Medicare. To correct this situation, Congress set up a demonstration program called "Medicare Subvention" in the Balanced Budget Act of 1997, another budget law that I helped to write.

Medicare Subvention basically means that Medicare will reimburse the Department of

Defense for medical care provided to Medicare-eligible retirees, much as it reimburses private-sector providers.

The budget I offered would make Medicare Subvention permanent, make it nationwide by 2006, and make the funds available to put it into effect. In addition, it would guarantee access to a new prescription drug plan for Medicare-eligible military retirees.

Over the next ten years, my budget provided a total of \$16.3 billion to improve health care for military retirees — \$10.9 billion for Medicare Subvention, and \$5.4 billion for prescription drug benefits.

My budget also treated prescription drug coverage as an entitlement. As an entitlement in the budget, prescription drug coverage would not have to compete with other defense priorities, like planes and ships, for discretionary funds every year.

The Republican budget resolution that passed the House did not include any funds to improve health care for military retirees. But two things are worth remembering. First, my budget drew strong support — 184 votes in the House. Second, the budget resolution is a necessary step in the budget process, but it is not the only step, and not the final step.

Nevertheless, I am proud to say that the Military Coalition, an association of 25 veterans' groups, saluted my provisions. The Military Coalition called my budget provisions "important steps toward fulfilling the commitment of health care for life that was promised the uniform services." When the final authorization and appropriation bills are passed this year, I hope that we take the remaining steps and enact the benefits in my budget resolution.

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